

# A Teacher's Case for Learning Center

Cynthia Leigh Reyes

**T**his typical morning scene during center time led me to ask myself some questions: Why are the learning centers not working as well as I predicted? What could help the children stay engaged? I decided to step back and observe the children from a different perspective to gain a better understanding of their needs.

By 8:45 a.m., the kindergartners have completed their calendar math and are working on assignments in thematic learning centers. As I work with several children at a table, I notice the escalated noise level in the centers. Looking up, I see Jack at the computer center, talking and playing with Ben instead of focusing on his work. At the phonemic awareness center, Sarah, Charlie, and Alyssa, who should be writing words that start with the *p* sound and practicing capital and lowercase letters, are also busy talking.

Jessica comes to my table and says, "I have finished all my work. What did you say to do next?" I tell her to get out her writing journal. Back at the writing center, she pulls the journal from her seat sack and begins writing. I see Burt waving his hands over his mouth and saying, "Woo, woo." He looks around the classroom instead of sounding out words for his monster story. "Burt, have you finished your sentences?" I ask, and he returns to work.

For several weeks, I took anecdotal notes on children's actions and conversations during learning center time. After I helped the children begin their work, I assessed their interest and level of engagement. I created a quick system for recording whether the children were **T**=talking, **OT**=on-task, or **L**=looking around. In addition, I noted the time and the center where the behaviors occurred.

The results of the observations made me realize that a significant number of children were off-task—talking, playing, and distracting others who were trying to complete their center work. I realized that one reason the centers were not working was because most of the activities involved worksheets and skills practice rather than hands-on explorations and learning.

## **What led to the direction the learning centers were taking?**

Our kindergarten is part of the college preparatory program of a K-12 school. The school focuses on a wide variety of developmental skills and cognitive challenges to ensure the mastery of skills by each child/student at every grade level along the way. All

teachers emphasize skills development. The kindergarten curriculum requirements include handwriting and the use of phonics workbooks to practice specific skills. I feel pressured to have the kindergartners reading and writing on a first grade level by the end of their kindergarten year. Families expect to see worksheets and math problems coming home weekly.

Some parents believe that if I am not sending home proof of the skills children learn in class, then I am not challenging their children. I feel conflicted because as an early childhood professional, I know from my graduate school courses Play and Creativity and Educational Research that relying on worksheets and workbooks is not developmentally appropriate for kindergartners. Hands-on activities are more effective ways to support their learning.

## **How do other teachers feel about the same pressures?**

During my graduate school research, I read case studies that documented teachers' efforts to manage the conflicts of negotiating between developmentally appropriate practices and academic standards. The studies highlighted the difficulty teachers face in finding workable solutions (Wien 2004). Ginger McDaniel, a first grade teacher, reinforces these findings in her coauthored article on accountability (McDaniel et al. 2005). She thinks "it is impossible not to feel pressure of academic achievement" and believes that active participation in learning is crucial. Her kindergarten students

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# Extensions in Kindergarten

engage in small group activities where they communicate, problem solve, and collaborate with their peers.

I learned I'm not alone in using practice worksheets and skills activities. Current research (Goldstein 2007) indicates that some early childhood curriculums are shifting to include these types of activities. Many accountability pressures result from mandated statewide testing (Parker & Pritchett 2006). Expectations from administrators, parents, and other teachers add to the pressures. Didactic teaching activities include memorization, drills, and practice worksheets. Parker and Pritchett (2006) found in their studies that even though the philosophies of early childhood teachers tend to be developmentally appropriate, their actual teaching practices incline toward teacher-directed learning. In addition, teachers often shift from using developmentally appropriate practices to using direct instruction.

With an awareness that I was increasingly using a didactic teaching approach instead of developmentally appropriate activities, I decided to look at my own practices and try some changes. My goal was to add learning center extensions and hands-on activities to engage children who were off-task and those who finished their work early.

Courtesy of the author



## Developing learning center extensions

Learning center extensions are thematic, open-ended activities that challenge all children to continue their learning after they complete the fundamental learning center tasks. For example, comparative studies show that “playful learning balanced by purposeful activities means more engaged learners and fewer behavior problems” (Perlmutter & Burrell 1995, 19).

**My goal was to add learning center extensions and hands-on activities to engage children who were off-task and those who finished their work early.**

**My plan.** Because of pressure to focus on children's mastery of specific academic skills, I continued to assign workbooks and instruction-focused activities in the learning centers. These activities often include handwriting practice and math worksheets with exercises in addition, subtraction, and word problems. When the children complete these assignments, they may select from various extensions based on their interests, and they rotate to different activities over a two- to three-week time period.

I encourage the children to explore the extensions in the centers freely—inquire, investigate, record findings—rather than just complete an activity in a specified time frame. I believe and have documented that learning center extensions can be an effective way to master academic standards and foster developmentally appropriate practices for differentiated levels of learners (Stuber 2007).

## Activities for Learning Center Extensions—Three Theme Topics

	Silly Business	Around Our Community	Ocean Explorations
<b>Dramatic Play Center</b>	<p>Read and act out silly stories</p> <p>Make puppet characters</p> <p>Arrange a theater and stage</p>	<p>Travel on a pretend field trip</p> <p>Create a bus or airplane interior</p> <p>Play the role of pilot or bus driver</p> <p>Dress up as passengers with suitcases</p>	<p>Dress up in beach clothes</p> <p>Play with sand toys and beach towels</p> <p>Explore a collection of shells and pebbles</p>
<b>Writing Center</b>	<p>Write and illustrate stories</p> <p>Use silly writing tools like fuzzy/vibrating pens</p> <p>Read each other's stories aloud</p>	<p>Write descriptions of people at home and at work.</p> <p>Write and illustrate a guide to city parks</p>	<p>Use trays filled with sand for drawing</p> <p>Write in the sand with shells and sticks</p> <p>Put a written message in a plastic bottle to float out to sea</p> <p>Decorate postcards and write a vacation message</p>
<b>Blocks Center</b>	<p>Make silly creatures</p> <p>Design varied habitats for creatures</p> <p>Use the creatures in block play</p> <p>Read books on habitats</p>	<p>Create a neighborhood out of blocks</p> <p>Plan a roadway (of blocks) with signs for streets</p>	<p>Build a block boat and add paper sails</p> <p>Construct an incline for passengers to board a ship</p> <p>Use blocks as make-believe cameras; draw photo prints</p>
<b>Math Center</b>	<p>Explore two- and three-dimensional shapes</p> <p>Create shapes of recycled materials</p>	<p>Create a store with cash register and play money</p> <p>Go shopping and figure out how much you spent</p>	<p>Do word problems on a wipe-off board</p> <p>After reading <i>Fish Eyes</i>, by Lois Ehlert, sort and count fish counters by size, color, and shape</p> <p>Play a game of Go Fish with a deck of fish cards</p>
<b>Science Center</b>	<p>Make kaleidoscopes</p> <p>Observe and record patterns</p> <p>Experiment in different light settings</p>	<p>Write observations of weather (clouds/temperature)</p> <p>Study books with pictures of cloud types</p>	<p>Construct paper boats to test in the water table</p> <p>Test a variety of floatables and sinkables</p> <p>Create a marsh of plants and observe changes when oil is added</p>
<b>Literature Center</b>	<p>Read from a selection of silly stories, such as <i>Warthogs in the Kitchen</i>, by Pamela Duncan, and <i>Wednesday Is Spaghetti Day</i>, by Maryann Cocca-Leffler</p>	<p>Read books such as <i>Houses and Homes</i>, by Ann Morris, and <i>In the Town</i>, by Stephen Caldwell</p>	<p>Read books such as <i>ABC Under the Sea: An Ocean Life Alphabet Book</i>, by Barbara Knox, and <i>Baby Animals of the Ocean</i>, by Carmen Bredeson</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<p><i>Magic Kaleidoscope</i>, by Sheila Black and Paul Selwyn</p> <p>To make a simple kaleidoscope: <a href="http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/activities/funscience/be-dazzled">http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/activities/funscience/be-dazzled</a></p>	<p><i>Me on the Map</i>, by Joan Sweeney</p> <p>Cloud categories: <a href="http://www.miamisci.org/ecolinks/activities/Atmosphere/clouds/inajar/clouddes.html">www.miamisci.org/ecolinks/activities/Atmosphere/clouds/inajar/clouddes.html</a></p>	<p><i>101 Great Science Experiments</i>, by Neil Ardley</p> <p>World map of oceans</p>

**Goals.** I had three goals in mind for the learning center extensions. First, they needed to be hands-on, with challenging but achievable activities that would benefit children with a broad range of skill levels. Second, they would foster each child's creativity and problem-solving skills. Third, they must be manageable. Some teachers may view hands-on activities as time consuming and expensive to put together. I found that with planning, this is not the case.

**The setup.** I based my extensions on themes related to our three-week language arts program. The children and I named the first learning center extension Silly Business, because it focused on humorous stories, antics, and funny situations involving make-believe characters. The learning center extension goals for this theme include exploring and creating habitats, creative writing, symmetry, collaboration, and problem solving. From journals, articles, books, and magazines, I incorporated ideas for math, science, language arts, and dramatic play (see

"Activities for Learning Center Extensions—Three Theme Topics").

The open-ended activities and materials varied so children might use them in

multiple ways, depending on each child's needs, interests, and learning style. Materials were relatively inexpensive and already available in the classroom.

I put each extension activity in a plastic box and included directions. I set aside time to introduce and explain the extensions, gradually adding one a day. The gradual introductions kept children from being overwhelmed and built their excitement for engaging in these new activities. Each extension had a designated location in the room. I used available space in the block center, art area, and science center and on empty tables.

I observed and made notes on children's engagement with the new learning center extensions.

## Extensions in action

I wondered if the centers would keep the early finishers engaged or if there would be chaos. Would children do their best work, or would they hurry through their learning centers practice work so as to get to the extensions? I observed and made notes on children's engagement with the new learning center extensions.

The first day, the classroom buzzed with excitement. Eight children made it to extension centers; they all wanted to go to the dramatic play (puppet) center first. I suggested that some visit the other centers, and they moved on to the math and the science centers.

After the first day of boisterous excitement, the novelty effect of the new extensions wore off and the children became quietly engaged, just as I imagined. In the dramatic play center, children made puppets, created a stage setting, and acted out their stories.

### In the math center extension.

Children made two- and three-dimensional shapes out of toothpicks, straws, and pipe cleaners. They created house shapes, hexagons, triangles, cones, and cubes. As they built, Julian said, "I made a house and a bat with two triangles and two squares."

### In the science center extension.

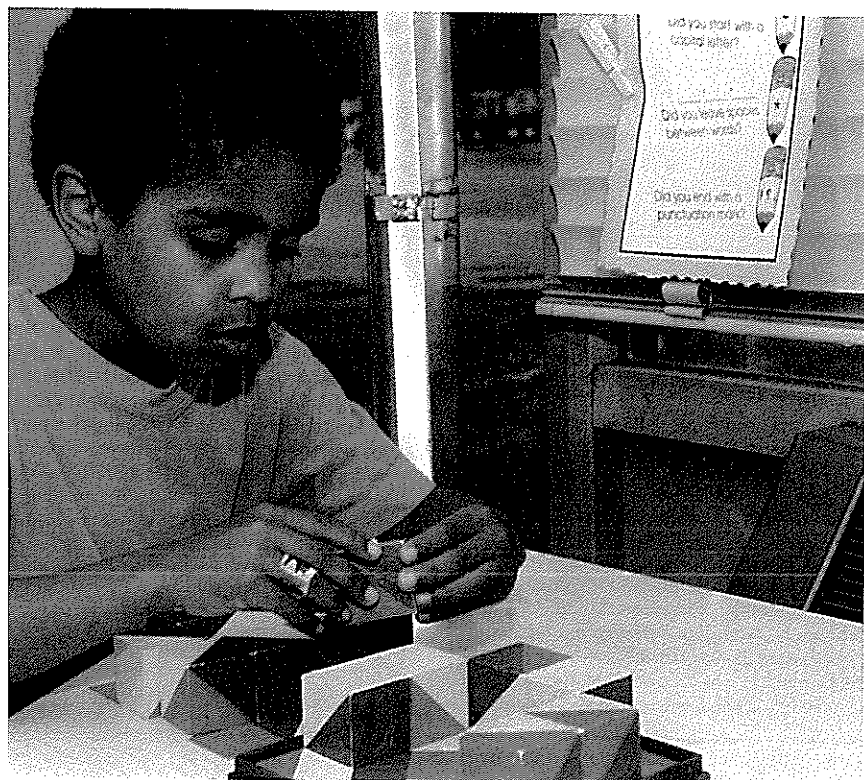
Children made kaleidoscopes. We had just read a silly story called *The Magic Kaleidoscope*. Matt said, "Mrs. Reyes, it's awesome when you put your hand at the end of the tube. I found a thousand million beads." They saw rays of light showing through their fingers and reflecting on the mirrors, making cool designs inside the kaleidoscopes.

### In the block center extension.

Children made silly creatures and designed a habitat for their creations.

### In the writing center extension.

Later in the week, those who had finished making silly creatures and puppets wrote terrific stories about



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them. Amber excitedly described her story: "The alien lived in Mars and he went to the space shuttle. He liked to swim but never wanted to take a bath, so yesterday he ate spaghetti and never stopped, so he got stuck in his home for ages and ages!"

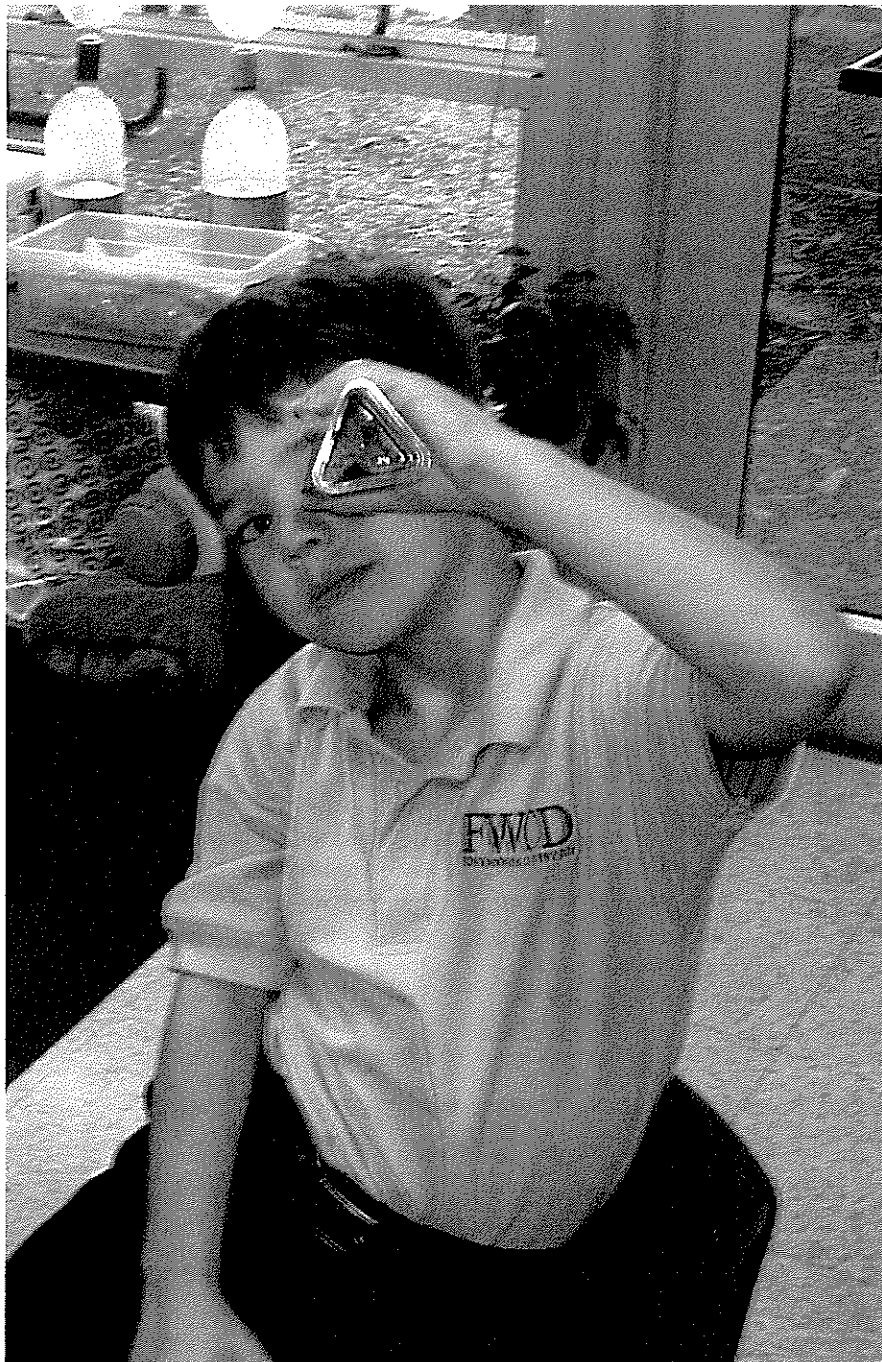
## Conclusion

During the next few weeks, I observed the children busily talking to each other about their projects. I found that those who never played at the block center or math center were now enjoying building and constructing all kinds of things.

Children who usually took a long time to finish their learning center work would now complete their activities and were sometimes the first to finish and move on to extensions. The early finishers never again asked, "What did you say to do now?" They always found something they enjoyed doing, which kept them challenged. Children still completing their learning center practice work kept busy at their tables and were not distracted by those who finished early. Early finishers engaged in extensions, and their classmates wanted to head there too. During the five-day rotation of learning centers, all children visited at least two extension centers. I introduced short practice drills at several learning centers so that all the children would get a chance to finish early and enjoy the new extensions.

A few days after introducing the extensions, I observed a dramatically different kindergarten. Instead of loud talking, there was a busy hum about the room. Children did not need me to ask them to get back to their work. Some diligently worked at their tables; others moved to extensions to create marvelous projects and explore new materials. I thought, "Ah, this is just what learning centers should be like!"

I continued to develop learning center extensions throughout the year related to other themes, such as Around Our Community and Ocean



Courtesy of the author

Explorations, and the children looked forward to immersing themselves in creating and exploring new concepts.

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